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Book Review

Ateeta-Manthana, Maithili Autobiography by Sri Chandranath Mishra 'Amar', published by Navaratna Goshthi, Mishra Tola, Darbhanga 2010, Pp. 252 Price Rs. 300.

This is not only an autobiography, but also a captivating Saga of the growth of a poet and a man of letters as well as a living and moving account of the way of life of traditional Maithil brahman society beginning in the early nineteen-forties coming down to the first decade of the new millenium, spanning over six decades, and straddling several worlds at one and the same time. A brilliant tour-de-force[1] in that it finally turns into the memorable story of how the half-crazy son of a noted Sanskrit pandit attached to the Darbhanga Raj came to be a central figure of Maithili Literature, becoming decades later a sort of institution through which a relatively obscure language group and the culture it represents becomes recognisable.

The story that Sri Amar — now in his mid-eighties— tells defies all chronological order and norms as he goes on remininseing, back and forth, with an amazing candour and a freedom from inhibitions, remembering friends and relatives and acquaintances, friends of friends, relatives of realtives, and acquaintances, indead a whole bunch of people connected with his extended family, telling their stories, relating their situations, the jokes and anecdotes they told as well as the jokes about them that other told ad lib.

Notwithstanding the author's recurrent apologies for his 'digressions', the book makes a delightul reading owing to the ancedotal nature of the narrative. In fact, the book is richly interspersed with hilarious old-world ancedotes, and apart from the pure entertainment that the odd situations provide, they help to create the atmosphere, and a lively sense of the milieu[2] in which Sri Amar grew up and lived his life.

Basically, it is the story of a boy bubbling with energy and verve and initiative in the face of the direst of family situations avid of opportunity to see, hear and experience life, eager to do his best in every situation, never accepting defeat or discomfiture, always upbeat.[3]

As a boy, Sir Amar would-usually accompany his father, the Pandit, whenever he happened to visit different native states like Jaipur, Jodhpur, Bikaner, Patiala, Banaras and cooch Bihar, among others, as the representative of the Maharaja of Darbhanga.

I cannot resist the temptation to recount at least one of these experiences when. Ari Amar happened to visit Cooch Bihar with his father; I quote :

> "My father took over two weeks to return from the visit to Cooch Bihar : I was the reason for this. Now, whenever my father visited a native state, the party was put up at the state Guest-house. As my father would not partake of the Guest-house food, provisions would be brought to us on a daily basis, and I would then cook the meals for the party. Now this person; who brought our provisions happened to be a Maithil brahman from a village near Madhubani, who was also the priest at the queen-mother's Kali-temple in the palace.
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> Having made all preparations for my father's puja, I was doing my **Gayatri-japa** in course of my **Sandhyavandana**, standing as usual on one leg, while our valet was making preparations for the meals to be cooked by me. When this brahman arrived with our provisions, he was so amazed to

see me at my **japa** that he kept staring at me for nealy five minutes. When he returned to the Queen-mother, he spoke to her about me and how I had been doing my **japa**, standing on one leg.

When he showed up next morning with the provisons, he said to me : "you have been asked to come over to the Queen-mother right now." I simply could not guess why I had been called. I told him : "My father does not take food cooked by anyone else : I have to start cooking right after my **Sandhya Vandana**. You may come and take me with you in the afternoon." So he came again at 4 PM and took me to the Queen-mother's suite in the palace. She had five or six daughters only one of whom, Gayatri Devi[4] had been married off. The Queen-mother was seated with the rest of her daughters round her when I arrived there. She started speaking to me in Bangla, asking me to introduce myself and so on. As I could not understand Bangla, the brahman acted as the interpreter. The princesses seemed to have been pampered by the Queen-mother, and said something to me in Bangla : I learnt that they had asked me to show them how I did my **japa,** standing on one leg. I said a little inpudently : "**Gayatri-japa** is no **tamasha** : it is worship for which there should be the right time, place and the right seat; it is also to be done before one has eaten anything."

It seems to me now as I look back that the Gayatri-japa was apoint of attraction for the princesses as their sister was named Gayatri.

Anyhow the Queen-mother kept smiling and said something to the brahman in Bangla. I was offered **sandesh** on a silver platter and water to drink in a

silver tumbler....

> The brahman returned with me to my father, and told him that the princesses were most eager to see me doing my **japa** standing on one leg, he said that as he was himself a Maithil brahman and cooked for the Queen-mother, a widow, he would cook for our party too that the queen-mother had sent him with the request that after I'd made prepations for my father's puja, I should go to the palace and do my **Sandhya Vandana** there. My father gave his consent for the plan allowed me to go. Thus my whole **Sandhya Vandana** and **Gayatri-japa** became a show for the princesses and a week passed in this way. My father would make request for our departure but it kept being put off, taking nearly a fortnight. Before we left I was given a present of five units of dress and a guinea. On return my father told my mother : "Batahu[5] has returned with even more gifts than myself."

Thus the author goes on reminiscing, pondering over the past, and wondering at the strange course of events of his life which finally led to his becoming the most sought-after and versetile figure in Maithili literature through his singleminded dedication to the cause of Maithili.

It is characteristic of this work that it is hard to find references to the year, much less to the date when a certain event happened. The author seems to breathe in, as he gives utterance to reminiscence after reminisence in a timeless stream of consciousness, of a life lived to the full, with memories bound thgether in an organic unity.

One of the very few mentions of year is in a context which too characteirses. Sri 'Amar's life of struggle, whche he says at one point after admiring the bicycle as the most useful invention for ordinary middle-class struggling folk :

"I may have travelled thousands of kilometres by a bike for sixty years, from 1942 to 2001."

In course of this ongoing series of ancedotes and reminiscences, this work, to all appearances an autobiography, turns into a record of institution concerned with the promotion of Maithili, with vignettes of its writers and poets, as well as figures with whom the author has come into contact through his long and active literary career.

Thus, while writing the reminiscences of his own life, Sir Amar has produced **ad lib** a vastly entertaining log-book which records not only the history of Maithili literature in its march towards maturity but also as a modern Indian literature in its struggh for recognition on the national scene. As the convener of Sahitya Akademi's Maithili Advisory Board Sri Amar's activities continued to multiply and it seemed a wonder to himself how on earth he managed to keep pace with it all in his eighties.

The work is indeed characterized on every page by the author's sense of humility and wonder to such an extent that if one were to be asked to suggest an alternative title for it, one would be tempted to call it 'Myself surprised' !

Reference :

1. An exceptional achievement using the full skill, ingenuity, resources etc of a person, country or group; stroke of genius.
2. An evnironment, medium or condition
3. Optimistic, happy
4. Celebrated later as one of the most beautiful women in India.
5. The author's childhood nick-name, literally the 'mad one'

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